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(KJOHNSTONE AND KKLARMAN)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TUNIS: MAKING POLITICAL HAY FROM UNREST IN REDEYEF

REF: A. A. TUNIS 668 B. TUNIS 615 C. TUNIS 596 D. IIR 6  
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[1](#)B. DTG 241425Z JUN08 E. TUNIS 394 F. TUNIS 362 G.  
TUNIS 131

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) A month after the latest demonstrations in the phosphate mining town of Redeyef in Gafsa province near the Algerian border, the government continues to maintain a high police and security presence in the area. The police have been rounding up suspected agitators and several people have been tried and sentenced to 6-17 months in prison. Political opposition parties and NGOs are trying to keep pressure on the government to address the situation. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Reftels catalogue the unrest that started in January 2008 in Redeyef spreading to Metlaoui, Mdhila, Moulares and most recently, in May, to Feriana in Kasserine province (Ref C). In early June new demonstrations in Redeyef turned violent (Ref B). These protests reflect the rising level of frustration in less developed regions of Tunisia exacerbated by increasing prices for food and gasoline. The government is sensitive to the unemployment issues, and has tried ineffectively to address the problem for years through tax incentives for private sector investment and through limited public investment. A Tunisian private economic consultant, who worked on an EU Commission study prepared for the Ministry of Industry on economic development in Gafsa, told us part of the frustration in Redeyef is that workers are aware the world market price for phosphates has increased dramatically but they have not seen any increased investment by the company or the government in the town. He estimated the Gafsa Phosphate Company earned \$1.8 billion dinars (\$1.56 billion) in 2007 and will earn 3.5 billion dinars (\$3.04 billion) in 2008. This is higher than recent newspaper speculation. The General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) labor union recently concluded negotiations with the Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce, and Handicrafts (UTICA) on a framework agreement and has started specific sector negotiations (Ref A). They will conduct negotiations for the phosphate workers under the mining sector category, but the timing is not confirmed. We will report on these negotiations once they start.

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Handing out Sweets and Biscuits  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) In a two-pronged response to the demonstrations the GOT has used force to control the immediate security problems but has also started a public relations campaign, acknowledging the poverty issues in the region. On the

positive side, President Ben Ali visited Kasserine July 5 and was received by a welcoming pro-government demonstration. He will probably visit Gafsa in the near future. During his visit he announced government funding to rebuild two mosques, repair roads leading to two local shrines, provide two new school buses and support for the soccer team. Similarly, the UGTT Secretary General Abdelssalem Jerad announced plans to visit Gafsa in July. In the press, at least one editorial appeared praising Ridha Ben Mosbah, the newly appointed head of the phosphate company, for meeting with NGO representatives. However, on the security side, the police arrested three UGTT officials in the Redeyef region for encouraging the demonstrators. (Comment: Many young males are reported to have fled the area to avoid police harassment.) Adnane Hajji, the spokesperson for the demonstrators, was arrested June 22 in Redeyef, along with other activists. He was previously the regional Secretary General for UGTT but was relieved of his duties after he accused certain UGTT officials of corrupting the hiring system at the phosphate plant. There have been no reports that the government or UGTT plan to investigate allegations that the head of UGTT in Gafsa, a ruling party member, was influencing hiring decisions at the phosphate plant.

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Opposition Parties and NGO's Press the Government  
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14. (SBU) Opposition parties and NGO's are trying to keep pressure on the government to address the social and development issues in Gafsa. A member of the opposition party Democratic Forum for Work and Liberty (FDTL) was arrested for two days while covering the clashes between the

police and the demonstrators. FDTL published a protest against the arrest in its paper. Opposition parties organized several events in Sfax, Monastir, Kairouan and Gabes to support the demonstrators in Gafsa. The GOT prevented all of the events except the one in Gabes. The FDTL and the UGTT union leadership have been trading complaints with the government in the press over allegations that the government exaggerated the level of violence in the demonstrations (Ref B). The UGTT called for an open dialogue on the Gafsa situation and asked for the release of all those arrested. On June 17 Freedom and Equity reported that four activists were conducting a hunger strike outside the UGTT headquarters in Feriana to protest police aggression. The Tunisian Human Rights League denounced the arrest of the demonstration leaders and plans to host a conference on the situation in the mining region July 11. (Comment: We expect the GOT will prevent the conference or at least block any independent media participation.). On June 9 Amnesty International condemned the police violence used to quell the demonstrations and called on the GOT to investigate the June 6 shooting death of Hafnaoui Maghdhaoui during the demonstration. On July 6 the Secretary General of opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) Maya Jeribi called on the government to stop trying to solve social problems with security measures.

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Security Presence High  
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15. (S) On 20 June the DATT traveled to Redeyef and was able to confirm a heavy police and National Guard presence in the town (Ref D). There was also a small military presence on the outskirts of the town which did not appear to be directly involved.

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Comment  
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16. (C) Although the opposition political parties are working to keep the demonstrations in the limelight, the government has blocked many of their efforts and has prevented many from going to Redeyef. Because freedom of assembly and expression

are so restricted there is little effective action the political parties can take. Their efforts, in the end, appear aimed at raising their own profile rather than pressing for realistic measures to address the unemployment problems or the government's use of force. Likewise, President Ben Ali's funding for road repairs and buses are unlikely to reduce the frustration in the region. We will have to wait to see if the labor negotiations later this year address the fundamental jobs and salary issues, but it is improbable.

GODEC